

ANCIENT WORDS FOR MODERN DISCIPLES

October 2, 2022 | When God Doesn't Do What You Want or Expect (Habakkuk)

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Can you think of a time when God did not do what you wanted or expected? How did you respond?

Read Habakkuk.

Ask God to use Habakkuk to help you respond in faith when He does not do what you want or expect.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God sometimes works in ways we do not expect or want. We must respond in faith.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Be prepared to not understand what God is doing in every situation in your life.

MEDITATE

"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the prophet Habakkuk and his prophetic book.

Q: *Habakkuk's initial addresses to God are sometimes referred to as complaints,*

which in this context has a more formal meaning than we typically use today. What is the difference?

Q: *How is Habakkuk different from the other Minor Prophets we have looked at so far? How does this book address the people of God in the Old Testament?*

Although the superscription lacks any historical details, we can be sure that Habakkuk ministered in the nation of Judah some time during the late 7th century, primarily because of how the book depicts the Chaldeans (Babylonians). In Habakkuk's prophecy, the Chaldeans were a recognized power in the ancient Near East but not yet a direct threat to Judah (Habakkuk 1:6). This describes only a short period at the end of the 7th century, sometime during the reign of Josiah, Jehoahaz, or Jehoiakim. During this time, Judah was caught in the crossfire of the superpowers in the ancient Near East. More importantly, as Habakkuk makes clear, the people sharply declined morally and were unfaithful to their covenant with God.

Habakkuk is a mixture of expected and unexpected. He mentioned Judah's moral decline and unfaithfulness (Habakkuk 1:2–4) and prophesies the destruction of a foreign nation (Habakkuk 2:6–20). These things are common themes with prophetic literature. But Habakkuk was not confronting Judah with its wickedness or passing along a message from God. He was begging God to judge the nation. The injustice he saw could not be allowed to continue. Furthermore, when God responded to his formal complaint, Habakkuk questioned how God would hold Judah accountable. So, Habakkuk had a different purpose than the other prophets, even though there is some overlap in themes. His book addresses the nature of God and His interactions with the peoples of the earth. It feels more philosophical in nature because he was more concerned with addressing questions about God rather than simply relaying God's message. Habakkuk wanted to know why God did not act. When God committed to acting in the future, Habakkuk questioned His plans.

Q: *In what ways have you questioned God?*

Q: *How can you maintain faith in God even when you question His actions or nature?*

APPLICATION POINT – Questioning God is something most of us can relate to. God sometimes, perhaps oftentimes, works in ways we simply would not work ourselves. Habakkuk shows us that it is okay to question what God is doing. Our questions do not amount to disobedience, but we must remember to question God from the standpoint of faith. Just because we do not understand Him does not mean we should abandon our faith. Furthermore, questioning Him does not mean He must answer our questions or answer them in a way we find satisfying. When we question God, we cannot forget He is still God, and we are still His creatures.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The structure of Habakkuk is straightforward. It begins with Habakkuk questioning God and then God’s response (Habakkuk 1:1–11). This pattern is then repeated (Habakkuk 1:12–2:20). The book concludes with a prayer and a song rejoicing in God.

1. FIRST COMPLIANT
2. SECOND COMPLIANT
3. HABAKKUK’S RESPONSE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each part of Habakkuk and draw personal applications from the prophet’s message.

1. FIRST COMPLIANT

▣ HABAKKUK 1:1–11

🗨️: *What was the cause of Habakkuk’s discouragement?*

🗨️: *What did Habakkuk want God to do?*

Habakkuk’s first complaint concerns why God allowed the wicked to pervert justice and do violence to the righteous. Habakkuk’s complaint does not include great detail. The use of “I” and “me” suggests that a personal matter had spurred his questions, but if this was the case, he concluded by framing this personal matter within the larger

pattern of violence and injustice he saw within his society (Habakkuk 1:4). In doing so, Habakkuk called for the right exercise of the law and the success of justice. Thus, Habakkuk's question was the opposite of Job's. Job wanted to know why the righteous suffered. Habakkuk wants to know why God did not respond on behalf of the righteous when they suffer the violence of the wicked. Didn't God care what happened to the righteous?

The unexpected element of Habakkuk's complaint is that God's own people were the perpetrators of violence, not the surrounding nations. They were the recipients of the Torah. Therefore, Habakkuk was calling for judgment on his own people. Habakkuk also appears to be indicting God to some degree. God had refused to hear his cry for help (Habakkuk 1:2). God did not respond to wrong (Habakkuk 1:3). His law was ineffective at achieving justice (Habakkuk 1:4). We know, and Habakkuk knew, this was not the case, even if this is where the evidence led. We must wait for God to respond.

❓: *What limits must you place on yourself when you question why God allows evil things to happen?*

❓: *How can questioning God in response to injustice be an act of faithfulness?*

APPLICATION POINT – In many contexts, questioning an authority figure is taken as a sign of insubordination or disrespect. That could certainly be the case in some instances when we question God, but not necessarily so. In one respect, questioning God is the only appropriate response to the evil around us. Although Habakkuk suffered personal injustice, he did not think it was his responsibility to resolve the matter on his own, nor did he assume that God did not really care. Instead, by going to God, he recognized Him as the only true authority who can address evil and injustice in this world. In many cases, we would be far better off respectfully questioning God when we encounter evil rather than seeking to resolve the matter on our own.

❓: *How did God respond to Habakkuk's complaint?*

❓: *How did God use the Chaldeans' pride, brutality, and strength for His own purposes?*

God responded to Habakkuk's complaint by saying He was raising up the Chaldeans to judge the nations, including Judah. The Chaldeans would brutally conquer the lands of the ancient Near East, and in doing so,

would unwittingly be God instrument of judgment on evil nations. What was remarkable about God’s plan is what we would consider to be the Chaldeans worst qualities—their fierceness, their strength, their violence—were used for God’s purposes in dispensing His judgment. The worse the Chaldeans were, the harsher God’s judgment on these evil nations became.

❓ *What does sending a nation in response to evil reveal about God’s sovereignty?*

❓ *Was God unaware of what Habakkuk was complaining about?*

APPLICATION POINT – God was not unfamiliar with the evils and injustices Habakkuk addressed. In fact, God knew of them before and in greater detail than Habakkuk did. In His divine providence, He was already at work to address what Habakkuk was struggling with. This reveals God’s goodness and justice, but it also reveals that He will act in His own timing. Even though raising up one nation to judge another is not quick, this is how God determined to hold the nations accountable. We have no choice but to concede that His timing is perfect, even when we do not understand.

3. SECOND COMPLAINT

■ HABAKKUK 1:12–2:20

❓ *Why was Habakkuk offended by God’s first response?*

❓ *What accusations did Habakkuk make against the Chaldeans?*

As God predicted, His response astounded Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:5). His response caused another moral dilemma for Habakkuk that was as bad or worse than the original. God’s instrument for judgment was worse than what was being judged. As bad as Judah had become, they were nowhere near as wicked as the Chaldeans, who dragged captives away on hooks, worshipped their own brutality, and profited from the suffering of others (Habakkuk 1:16–17). Habakkuk’s second complaint was that God could not possibly judge an evil nation by means of a nation even more evil. How could a holy God use such a vile tool (Habakkuk 1:13)? If the Chaldeans were God’s tool for judgment,

would they be allowed to go on killing nations forever? Habakkuk could not fathom how God could act in this way.

Q: *What evidence is there in your life that God does not think like you do?*

Q: *Why do we think some people are more wicked or sinful than others?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the ways we try to secure our own righteousness is by comparing ourselves with others, much as Habakkuk compared Judah and Babylon (Chaldea) here. Most people would be willing to admit they are not perfect but believe that compared to others, they would not seem that bad. God’s plan to judge Judah through the Chaldeans shows how empty this philosophy is. The wickedness of someone else cannot make you righteous. If you ever find yourself looking to other people to make yourself feel better about your own sin, you are not looking for your righteousness in Christ. This passage illustrates Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Q: *What is the main point of God’s response to Habakkuk’s second complaint?*

Q: *In Habakkuk 1:6, it is revealed the Chaldeans were not even at the height of their powers, but now, Habakkuk learned they would also fall. What does this reveal about God and history?*

God responded to Habakkuk’s second rebuke by assuring him that the Chaldeans would also face judgment and be condemned for their brutal atrocities. God has frequently used people who do not believe in Him for His own purposes. The Assyrians and the Babylonians were wicked peoples who became God’s means of judging His people (Isaiah 8; Jeremiah 4:5–31; 6:1–30). God has even used wicked people as a means of saving His people, such as the Persian king, Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28–45:7). Furthermore, God would punish those nations who used excessive violence even if He had originally ordained them as an instrument of judgment (Isaiah 10:5–19; 14:4–23). So, Habakkuk could know that God was aware of the Chaldean’s wickedness, and He would bring an equally harsh judgment on them in the future.

- Q: *God would judge the Babylonians but not immediately. How does waiting for God to act demonstrate righteousness (Habakkuk 2:4)?*
- Q: *God condemns the Chaldeans for their greed. How does greed itself become a burden to the greedy?*

APPLICATION POINT – God called the righteous to wait patiently for the judgment of the wicked (Habakkuk 2:2–3). Habakkuk 2:4 says, “But the righteous shall live by his faith.” The author of Hebrews quoted this verse to encourage the faithful to persist in their faith (Hebrews 10:38). God rarely acts in our timing, so it is our task to demonstrate the righteousness we receive from God by faithfully waiting for Him to act on our behalf.

3. HABAKKUK’S RESPONSE

■ HABAKKUK 3

- Q: *What idea is found at the beginning and in the middle of this prayer (Habakkuk 3:3, 16)?*
- Q: *How does Habakkuk’s prayer compare to God’s speech to Job (Job 38:1–11)?*

Habakkuk concluded his book with a poetic prayer and a psalm of praise. The prayer begins with a superscription like we see in the Psalms. It also contains the word “Selah.” We are uncertain of this word’s meaning, but it is a kind of poetic notation. This prayer reveals that Habakkuk had become aware of the audacity of his complaints. Even though he did not understand, he should have been prepared to accept God’s actions and more cautious of making his complaints known.

The prayer begins and ends by recording Habakkuk’s fear at encountering the Lord (Habakkuk 3:2, 16). Within the prayer, Habakkuk alluded to several significant events in the nation’s past, such as the plagues of Egypt (Habakkuk 3:5), the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan River (Habakkuk 3:8, 15), and the defeat of the nations in Canaan (Habakkuk 3:12–15). Who was Habakkuk to question the actions of such a powerful and wonderful God?

Q: *How does Habakkuk's prayer compare to Jesus's reception of Thomas (John 20:24–29)?*

Q: *How can you use God's past actions to give you confidence during times of questioning?*

APPLICATION POINT – Although Habakkuk appropriately responded in fear and trembling, it is wonderful to see that God did not respond to his questioning with anger. This shows us that it is okay to have questions about God, His nature, and His actions in the world, if we do so without suggesting He somehow answers to us. We see a similar situation play out in Thomas after the resurrection (John 20:24–29). Thomas would not believe in the resurrection apart from physical proof. Jesus appeared to him and gave him the proof he needed. Jesus did not chastise Thomas, even while commending the faith of those who would believe without seeing.

Q: *What was Habakkuk saying when he described the failure of nature and crops in Habakkuk 3:17?*

Q: *How does Habakkuk's declaration relate to his complaints?*

Habakkuk concluded with a song in which he made a marvelous profession of faith. Even in the absence of hope and provision, he would rejoice in God. He had come a long way since his opening complaints. He recognized that his faith in God must withstand times of challenge and sorrow. Furthermore, he had learned to treasure God even more than the necessities of survival. Nothing would shake his faith in God. God is a better source of strength than anything this world has to offer. Youth and food might fail, but God's salvation will persist.

Q: *Do you think your faith is contingent on material goods and provisions? If so, how can you strengthen your faith to reflect Habakkuk's confession? If not, how can you protect your faith to keep from sliding into periods of self-reliance?*

Q: *In a culture of relative abundance, how can we meaningfully make Habakkuk's declaration?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians, especially in our culture, have a strong sense of God's provision. We trust that He will provide for our needs and help us in times of hardship. In the past, I have often struggled when I encountered this mindset. The phrases "God will provide" or "if God wills it, He will make it happen" at times have felt like platitudes that offer me little comfort. This has been a struggle because I know that many times in history Christians have met their demise in times of need or hardship. They have leapt out in faith and fallen on their faces. Faith in Christ does not give us a pass from encountering trials in life or in death. I know Christians have died during famines and plagues. I know Christians have made great sacrifices for the gospel that seem to have come to nothing. I also struggle with these platitudes because I know that until Christ returns, every person, including believers, must face death. A day will come when strength fails and God's provision for this life comes to an end. It seems to me that the things Christians often say to encourage one another lack the sentiment found in Habakkuk 3:17–19.

Even though all of this is true, in recent years I have come to recognize that it is important for Christians to maintain a strong sense of God's provision. Such a mindset helps preserve our faith and gives us confidence to make sacrifices for the sake of the gospel. But within the context of trusting in God's provision, we still must retain the message of Habakkuk's song. Even if every plan goes awry and hope is gone, we will continue to trust in God because He is worth more than anything we can find in this life. He will give us the strength we need to face both success and failure.

NEXT STEPS

Habakkuk shows us how to respond when our faith in God is challenged. There is a way to maintain faith even while questioning what God is doing. More importantly, Habakkuk shows us how to maintain and even strengthen our faith during times of doubt and questioning. He looked to Scripture to draw strength so he could move forward through his questions with faith. Oakwood began this year by emphasizing the importance of reading Scripture and doing daily devotions. This is the main way you build a solid foundation in Scripture from which you can faithfully question what is happening when God does things you do not understand. If your daily devotional routine has waned as the year has progressed or through summer vacations, now is the time to renew your commitment to encountering God daily in His Word.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, there have been times when I have not understood what you were doing or why you allowed certain things to happen. Forgive me if my faith faltered during those times.

Jesus, in you, God has provided a salvation that can never be taken away. No matter what I face, I will treasure you above anything that could be taken away from me.

Father, you are the creator of heaven and earth and all that is within them. I have no right to make demands of you or think you owe me answers.

God, even during times I do not understand your will, I will continue to praise your name. Your worth is not contingent upon my understanding.